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Eric R. Jensen

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Poem for the Inauguration: The Spirit Line

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Michael Theune and Joanne Diaz

The Spirit Line

On Acoma, Laguna, Zuni and Hopi ceramics, a painted double line with ends that do not connect often encircles the vessel just below the rim on the interior surface. This is called a spirit line or spirit break [...] the open line's presence permits the spirit of the vessel to enter and leave it.

—Guide to the John Wesley Powell Collection of Pueblo Pottery

A casual glance might not reveal it, but if you look closely,
you can see the double line that circles the rim of the bowl,

comes all the way around, but does not quite close: this
is where the spirit of the vessel enters and leaves,

this mark that preserves and offers, holds and shares.
It is of course flaw, imperfection, wound, a sudden

extinction: an equator that bears the ghosts
of invasion, forgotten fairy tales of a tyrant's rule,

the trace of a creature endangered by its very existence,
the message that music, with its dark seeds, sends

from the past, only to evaporate in the air that receives it.
It echoes the breaking of the jars and canteens

that did not survive; it marks any object pulled
from its context, so easily misappropriated

by facile certainties and unintended loss. It is
the parentheses filled with too much silence.

The line nearly dissolves under this pressure, but then
it opens into possibility, a synapse, open air

for a pirouette, canvas or page where space
has been saved for another line.

Here is the place where the spirit can move,
a porous membrane between self and other, art

and nature, mind and world, where is cultivated the care

required for our *incalculable responsibility*.

Let the spirit line be a symbol for this university
[no stanza break]

where the questions are continually reinscribed:

Who are we? What is good? How do we live? To whom
do we promise our labors? With whom must we make

amends? We scientists and artists, writers and activists,
humanists and healers, we who strive

to make lives that are useful and beautiful and true
are drawn together here and enlivened by these questions,

such precious, fragile things—